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THE REGIME VERSUS EAST GERMANY'S INTELLECTUALS

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THE REGIME VERSUS EAST GERMANY'S INTELLECTUALS

East German intellectuals are engaged in a controversy with the Communist regime over its cultural policies. This began before the party congress in January, at which the regime tried to whip restive "liberal" intellectuals into line.

Public discussions of the regime's cultural policies sprang up last October when certain of the creative intelligentsia--apparently reflecting the bolder attitude of Soviet intellectuals at that time--judged the time propitious for a change in East Germany. Party First Secretary Ulbricht was preparing for the congress by trying to portray himself as an anti-Stalinist, anti-dogmatist, anti-sectarian figure. The pressures for a less rigid cultural policy apparently increased as the intelligentsia thought it sensed a more congenial ideological climate. However, when Moscow's cultural line changed after Khrushchev's visit to the Moscow art exhibit in December, the Ulbricht regime quickly followed the Soviet lead in reverting to a more conservative policy. The cultural climate was forbidding indeed as the congress opened.

A Controversial Play

The regime may have permitted unusually free public discussion of its cultural policies in order to make a show of its "anti-dogmatism." The discussion was not, however, a completely controlled exercise

and has not been altogether stifled since the congress. Much of it has centered on the staging, after two false starts, of dramatist Peter Hacks' Die Sorgen und die Macht (Problems of Power).

Previously known for his satirical plays, Hacks, 34, emigrated from West Germany in 1955. Problems of Power is his first major effort to portray contemporary themes in line with the regime's standing injunction that playwrights must engage in the "construction of socialism." The play has had a checkered career; before its production by the Deutsches Theatre in East Berlin last fall, it had been revised twice in 1959 and again in 1960 to meet the objections of party censors.

The play has a fairly conventional "socialist" theme. It concerns a group of briquette factory workers who overfulfill production norms and earn high wages by turning out inferior briquettes which are then delivered to a nearby glass factory. The workers at the glass factory are poorly paid because the inferior briquettes prevent them from meeting their work norms. A boy from the briquette factory falls in love with a girl glass blower who persuades him to improve the quality of the briquettes. His efforts succeed, but the briquette factory workers' salaries fall as the glass workers' salaries

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increase. Despite a loss of morale--including his own--in the briquette factory, the boy heeds his sweetheart's pleas and perseveres.

Despite his stereotyped plot, Hacks succeeded in creating real characters who do not conform to conventional party standards of the "new socialist man." Almost without exception, his factory workers are interested only in higher salaries and general economic well-being and fail completely to understand "higher social goals." His party members are not unsympathetically portrayed; however, although well-intentioned, they emerge as uncertain, often stupid, and frequently incompetent to deal with the problems facing them.

The theme, with "virtue" triumphing in the person of the boy briquette worker, may have misled the party censors into permitting the play to be staged. If so, they were soon apprised of their errors by the party. Discussion of the play both in Neues Deutschland and other papers lasted from mid-October until mid-December, and by East German standards it was a lively discussion indeed. Hacks was bitterly attacked or staunchly defended week after week by numerous contributors, some of them well-known figures in the country's cultural life.

What turned out to be the definitive party judgment ap-

peared in Neues Deutschland on 16 December. Siegfried Wagner, former chief of the central committee's cultural department, and Kurt Bork of the Ministry of Culture rapped Hacks for developing his theme "mechanically, automatically, spontaneously, and without regard for our struggle." They accused him of substituting material incentives and personal feelings as the "main motive forces of social development" and argued that in real life the party and state "solve production problems and persuade people to change their attitudes toward their work."

Hacks' play continued at the Deutsches Theatre until the very eve of the party congress. It was scheduled to be resumed on 23 January, after the congress, and probably would have been if cold weather had not caused the closing of most of the theatres in East Germany.

The Poets

Even before the curtain rang down at the Deutsches Theatre a new chapter opened in the regime's duel with the creative artists. Stefan Hermlin of the poetry section of the Academy of Arts in East Berlin sponsored an evening of poetry reading at the academy on 11 December. He had appealed through Sonntag, a cultural weekly, for the submission of unpublished works. Of the 1,200 or more that he received,

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he read 50 to an overflow audience--mostly students. The evening was not advertised in the general press, but apparently was considered important in East German cultural circles.

It drew the party's censure in the 6 January issue of Sonntag, whose editor, Bernt von Kuegelen, charged that the program had included "individual poems full of gloom and images only decipherable with difficulty, in which the authors complain that happiness is difficult in this country and ...despair and confusion prevail. Reduced to their common essentials, these poems show discontent with our environment, gibing at a force whose address is not mentioned, but

To My Friends, the Old Comrades

When you regret our impatience,
And tell us that we have it easier today
Since we lie in made-up beds,
Since you built the house for us--

It is harder today to hate exactly
And to distinguish the fronts clearly in a friend
And not to avoid the uncomfortable things
And not let coldness into the heart.

For you dream easily of times of happiness;
But happiness is difficult in this country.
You must love differently than yesterday
And with sharper understanding.

And call dreams exactly by their names
And know the whole burden of the truth.

— Rainer Kirsch

which is clear between the lines." In case anyone had missed his point, Sonntag's editor reminded the Academy of Arts that one of its duties was to ensure that bourgeois ideology did not enter East Germany by the back door.

It now is clear that von Kuegelen's target was a young poet named Rainer Kirsch and, specifically, a sonnet entitled "To My Friends, the Old Comrades" which is its author's reply to the claim that the younger generation has an easy life by comparison with the existence its forebears have known.

Soon after von Kuegelen's blast, the Communist youth organization announced that it would stage a series of poetry readings. The first was held at Humboldt University in East Berlin on 8 January. An overflow audience stood in the aisles and crowded the rear of the hall. There was an air of expectancy and excitement, according to US Mission officers who were present, although the arrival of a deputy premier, the minister of culture and then candidate politburo member Alfred Kurella--plus the fact that movie and television cameras and recording devices had been installed--suggested that it was to be a ringing reaffirmation of the regime's cultural "line."

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There was some passable poetry by the same Kirsch whose work had been singled out in Sonntag, and by better known East German writers--such as Paul Wiens and Heinz Kahlau--but much was straight propaganda. The quality of the latter perhaps is best illustrated by the first line of a poem by the regime's current favorite, Guenter Engelmann: "Let us bomb the world with poetry!"

Mission officers were disconcerted to find that the propaganda received about as much applause as the better poetry although perhaps the audience was so pleased that the reading had taken place at all that it was deliberately making a gesture toward the authorities who were present.

The Congress

Speeches at the 17-21 January party congress testified to the malaise among East Germany's intellectuals. Kurt Barthel, an author and central committee member, found that "our present main weakness consists in the fact that authors who are party members differ among themselves on cultural questions." He pointed to the regime's past failures to encourage free discussion of basic, unresolved issues.

Alfred Kurella--at the time a candidate member of the polit-

buro and a long-time conservative controlling force in the party's cultural policies--admitted the leadership's concern over cultural developments and confessed that much of the dispute had arisen from Hacks' Problems of Power. "From a conception of socialism such as is present in Peter Hacks, from the portrayal of the policy of the party as a 'chain of errors,' from the party as a kind of opinion group, it is not far to the next step. This consists in feeling that one is restricted, restricted by the party and its officials, that one feels a 'vague anxiety.' And from there it goes quickly further to a call for 'liberation,' 'liberation' from this 'restriction,' for 'freedom of artistic inspiration,' without being tied to an understanding of our life, for freedom from assignments, for freedom from control of publishing by the state and direction of cultural life through our party...."

In addition to censuring Hacks and other dissident writers,

What is the main problem of party work? To convince people, shape the new face of people, eliminate the old and backward features and master new problems of the economic, political and cultural development of the GDR.

If writers want to give shape to the struggle for the new way of living, for the building of socialism, they need one prerequisite: love for the workers, peasants, artisans, for all the people who create material values. This is the essential factor!

- Walter Ulbricht at the Leipzig District delegates conference, as quoted by Neues Deutschland on 10 December 1962

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other speakers at the congress sharply attacked the Academy of Arts--where Hermlin had held forth. Kurt Hager, destined to become a full member of the politburo and chairman of its Ideological Commission at the congress, charged that the poetry reading at the academy "was misused for attacks against the central party organ and for dissemination of poems permeated by the spirit of pessimism, ignorant carping, and hostility to the party." The main object of criticism of the Academy's activities, however, was its journal Sinn und Form (Meaning and Form) and its long-time editor Peter Huchel, who had been relieved of his post early in January. Several speakers inveighed against Huchel's tolerance of "decadent" and "liberal" views and cited as proof of their charges widely circulated Western press comments that Sinn und Form was a "quiet enclave of liberalism" in East Germany.

**KURELLA**

It is another thing, however, when representatives of views who exclude truly realistic art because they do not understand the reality of socialist construction, do not recognize it, do not even like it, when these people claim monopoly rights, when they call their art the only true Socialist art. We can make no place for such an attitude in our public life....

Things are even more serious when artists with such views are members of our party. Our party statute contains duties for all party members. A party member is not obliged to declare himself only in agreement with party resolutions but also to struggle that these resolutions are put into practice.

We can no longer listen passively when, after long years of patiently conducted efforts at persuasion, party members insist on their viewpoint, when they wish to make their petty-bourgeois views of Socialism prevail, when they refuse to acknowledge Leninist party work, according to which a party member's literary and artistic activity is part of his party work....

-- Alfred Kurella, speech to the Sixth Party Congress

Alfred Kurella was not re-elected to the politburo but did remain a member of the central committee and later replaced Hermlin in the poetry and language section of the Academy of Arts. This section is scheduled for a discussion of "intensifying its work in line with the decisions of the Sixth Party Congress."

There is at least one sign that the cultural debate continues and that the regime is proceeding cautiously with the intellectuals. The 17 February issue of Sonntag published a strong and clever defense by Rainer Kirsch of the poem which drew von Kuegelen's criticism. With it was a rather lame reply in which von Kuegelen absolved Kirsch of disloyalty to the state order and concluded that his original attack had been directed primarily against

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Hermlin, who "allowed impermissibly generalized carping into the auditorium as verse without answering it."

The Future

The party congress added Kurt Hager, a trained, astute, and flexible Marxist ideologist, to the politburo, and put a number of experienced and professionally trained cultural specialists on the central committee. These changes, in the opinion of the US Mission, pre-
sage a more sophisticated but nevertheless strict and firm approach to cultural life in East Germany. The East German intellectuals, for their part, are apparently willing to work within the existing system to achieve their goal of a more liberal policy.

The regime, barred by the bloc's present ideological climate from adopting a simple Stalinist solution, probably



HAGER

will be guided by Moscow's handling of similar issues. As the US Mission points out, however, cultural liberalization carries a far greater risk for the East German regime because the country is not an integrated political entity. The tolerances are smaller; the chance of repercussions is correspondingly greater. For this reason, if no other, future cultural developments merit attention as a factor in estimating popular morale.

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